

**CELEBRATING
BLACK BOY
JOY THROUGH
STORYTELLING**

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what is
that

KINGS OF LITERACY

THE EARLY LITERACY COLLABORATIVE (ELC) is transforming Black family-educator collaboration in Seattle by co-designing meaningful practices with Black families and educators. This initiative amplifies community voices and empowers families, making literacy a shared journey.

With a focus on cultural relevance and a commitment to infusing joy into each engagement, the ELC builds strong relationships among families and educators. Since its launch in the 2021-22 school year, the ELC has brought together Emerson, Olympic Hills, and Wing Luke Elementary Schools with the Office of African American Male Achievement (AAMA), [Seattle Public Schools](#), local community organizations, and researchers from the University of Washington (UW) College of Education. This coalition highlights the unique experiences of Black students and their families, creating a rich environment for literacy exploration and growth.

Central to this transformative effort are Dr. Ann Ishimaru and Dr. Dana Nickson, key architects of the ELC's vision. As the faculty research director of [Leadership for Learning](#) and the director of the [Just Ed Leadership Institute](#) at the College of Education, Ishimaru critiques traditional instructional methods that often overlook the rich, valuable contributions that Black families bring to the educational landscape. "It's kind of systemic for us to presume that we have the answer and know what [students] need and not to see that there are already solutions, learning and creativity happening among families and communities," she notes, emphasizing the need to center families' lived experiences in the educational process. Nickson, an assistant professor of Education Foundations, Leadership, and Policy at the College of Education, also centers the brilliance and leadership of Black families in her work with attention to how spatial politics like school choice and gentrification constrain Black

families' educational agency and advocacy. "U.S. metropolitan regions are fast-changing and racial and economic inequities persists, however, if we partner with and learn from diverse Black families we will understand how they have long made places of care and learning that systems must learn from."

Dr. Mia Williams, the executive director of the [AAMA](#) and a doctoral alumna from Leadership for Learning, has also played a pivotal role in the ELC's success. "The goal of ELC is to center the voices and knowledge of families and communities, recognizing that they bring invaluable insights and expertise," Williams explains. Her guiding principle, "Nothing about us without us," underscores the importance of involving those most affected by educational policies in the creation of solutions.

As the ELC enters its new phase, it promotes shared leadership, encouraging educators and families to work together to improve education. Rather than just asking the system to acknowledge the expertise of Black families, the initiative gives them the tools and knowledge to actively participate. Understanding that each school and community is different, the ELC moves away from one-size-fits-all methods and focuses on the voices and leadership of the "kings" and their families, who truly understand their own experiences. This approach fosters a love for learning and builds a strong sense of identity, creating a more equitable and responsive educational experience for Black boys in grades 2 to 4.

KINGS IN ACTION

In June 2023, the ELC took a significant leap from planning to active implementation through hands-on Co-Design meetings. Here, families and community members were not just participants — they were instrumental in shaping new literacy practices. This collaborative effort ensured that the program reflected the cultural contexts and experiences of students, making it engaging and relevant.

It's important to recognize that this initiative goes beyond typical ideas of a "lesson" or "program." It emphasizes co-designing innovative literacy practices and fostering real partnerships between Black families and educators. Instead of just asking the system to involve Black families for better learning outcomes, the ELC shows how to learn together with the "kings" and their families. The goal is to transform instruction and schooling, moving away from an historically anti-Black status quo toward more just and pro-Black practices.

Rather than changing the existing literacy curriculum, the initiative adds complementary practices that honor the rich cultures and experiences of Black families. This expanded view of literacy goes beyond traditional reading and writing. The guiding principle, "literacy is more

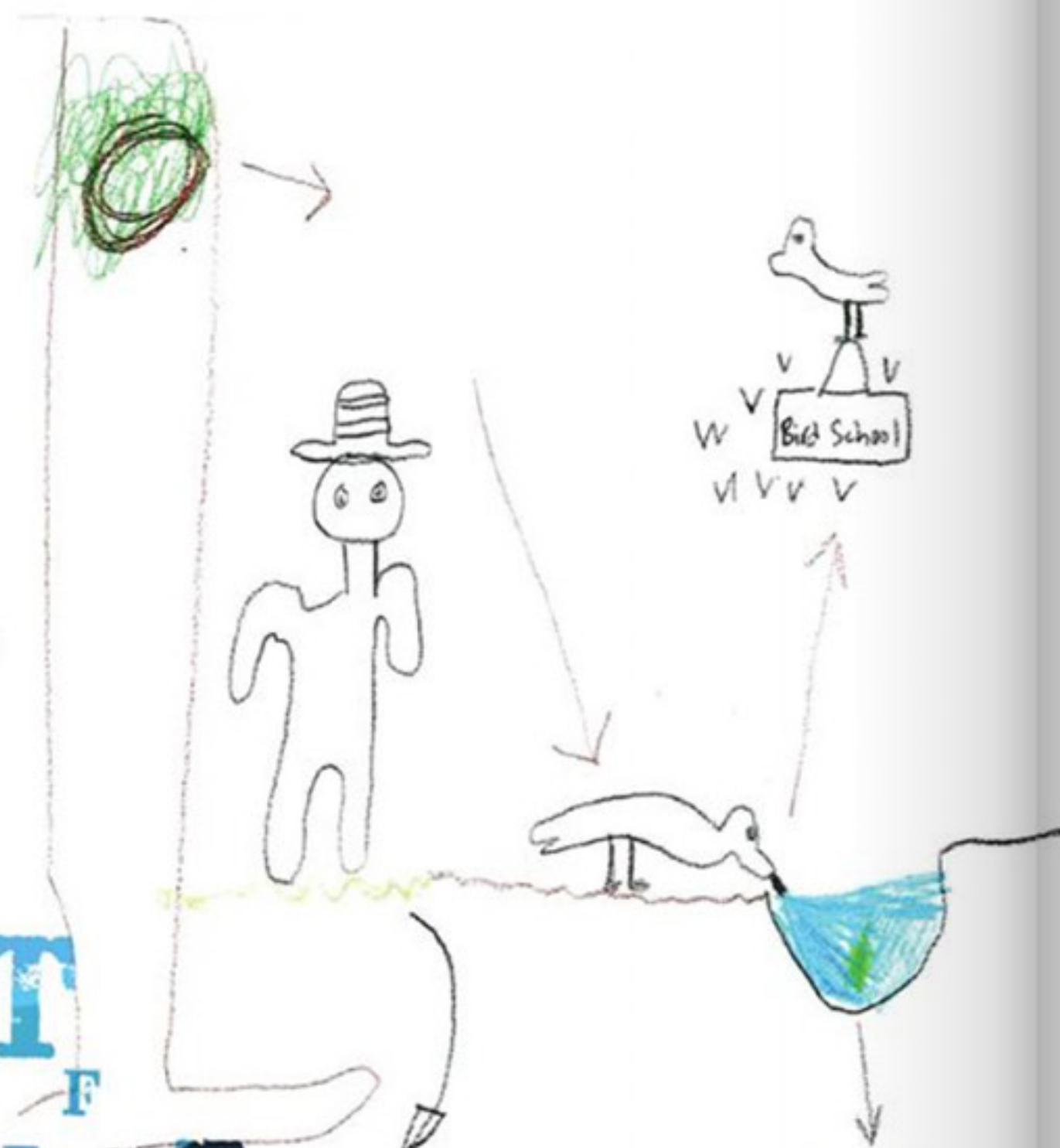
than reading and writing at school," captures this vision. By recognizing and using the oral storytelling traditions and linguistic strengths of Black families, the ELC draws on ancestral knowledge to create engaging and culturally relevant learning experiences.

Dr. Sefanit Habtom, a postdoctoral scholar at the College of Education, played a central role in this transition, leading the Research Community Practice Partnership (RCPP). She has been instrumental in rolling out the ELC across Olympic Hills, Wing Luke and Emerson Elementary Schools. Her leadership was crucial in overcoming challenges such as high staff turnover and tight budgets. "As a partnership, we co-designed a project focused on centering and learning from Black families' expansive literacy practices, rooted in their home, community, and ancestral knowledges," Habtom notes.



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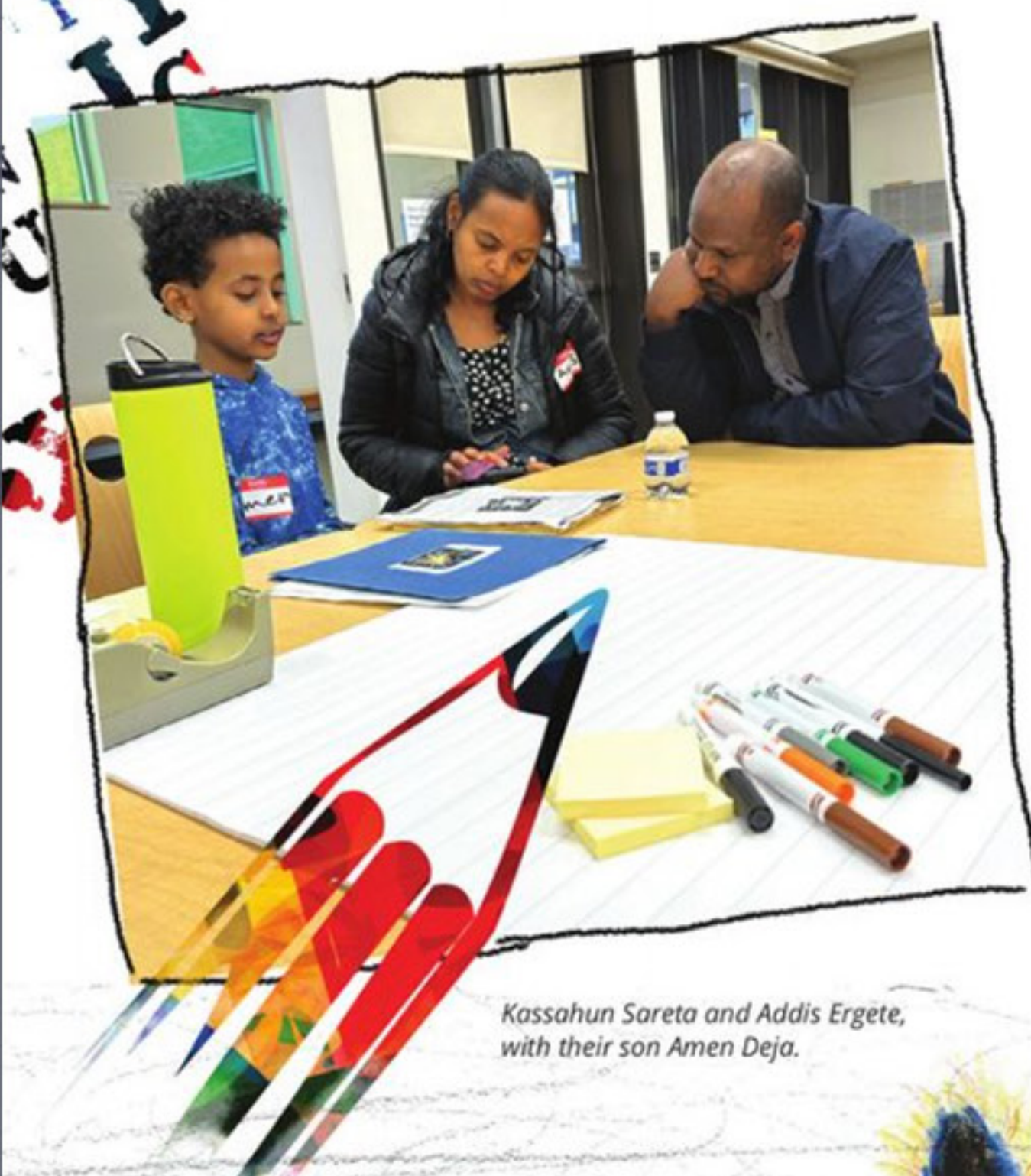
— DR. MIA WILLIAMS, AAMA executive director and Leadership for Learning alumna





We wanted to cultivate the joy of reading by leveraging what families already know and have access to, inspiring a sense of enjoyment through familiar and engaging activities.

— DR. SEFANIT HABTOM
UW College of Education postdoctoral scholar



Kassahun Sareta and Addis Ergete,
with their son Amen Deja.

One of the ELC's distinctive features is its emphasis on storytelling and play as core components of the learning process. Families first shared stories from their cultures, histories, and languages, imparting important values and lessons that resonate with students. Building on these rich narratives, students were then encouraged to create alternative endings, transforming them into storytellers themselves. "We wanted to cultivate the joy of reading by leveraging what families already know and have access to, inspiring a sense of enjoyment through familiar and engaging activities," Habtom explains. This approach not only made literacy learning more enjoyable but also connected it to students' home and community experiences.

A particularly memorable project was the creation of the story "[Picksee: The Curious Little Crow](#)." Students, families, and educators collaborated to develop and illustrate this story, with the crow symbolizing the journey between home and school. Hasaan Kirkland, a doctoral candidate in Teaching and Curriculum at the College of Education, guided students through the illustration process and organized activities like a relay race that mirrored the crow's journey. "The relay race activity, using cut-out crow images, was powerful because Hasaan likened it to each student's unique journey. Although there are many ways to arrive at a destination, and it may take some longer than others, the important part is to continue your journey," reflects Habtom. The crow's journey metaphorically represents multiple ways of navigating and finding fulfillment in one's learning.

This collaborative project allowed students like Siem Kibrom and Senay Kibrom to explore their creativity by developing alternative endings to the story. Siem, heading into 6th grade, and Senay, moving to 5th grade, found the experience particularly rewarding. Senay shared, "The hardest part was making the end of the story because we had to think of that for like three days and then we just came up with like, hey, why don't we just make our own [endings]?" This "choose your own adventure" aspect illustrates a key insight: instead of finding a singular right ending, they realized multiple endings were possible. This

project allowed them to tap into their creativity and take ownership of their learning, showing that there are many ways to embrace the values and lessons from their families and communities while achieving success in school.

Elijah Collins-Harden, who was transitioning from 4th to 5th grade, reflected on how collaboration with peers and family enriched his experience. "People might have [different ideas], like, somebody wants to draw a circle, but you might want to draw a triangle. So, you would have to work together and maybe draw a square instead." Elijah's example of navigating differences — not just settling on a triangle or circle — demonstrates not just a compromise but the essence of co-design. The "square" represents both the final product and the dynamic process of integrating diverse perspectives into a unified vision.

The project culminated in an end-of-year event, where students presented the book in English, Somali, Tigrinya, and Amharic, showcasing their engagement and creativity. One of the most heartwarming outcomes of the program was witnessing the kings' confidence begin to shine through. Habtom recalls a standout moment: "Elijah ... stood up and introduced the book. He said, 'Hi, I'm Elijah and I'm one of the authors of the book we're going to read for you today.'" This celebration not only highlighted the students' ownership of their work but also illustrated the success of the ELC's transition from planning to implementation. By integrating storytelling, play, and community input, the ELC created intergenerational literacy engagements that were not only academically rigorous but also deeply inclusive, reflecting the diverse cultural backgrounds of the students and enriching their educational experience.

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Top (left to right): Jonah Potts, Senay Kibrom, Kaliab Fentie, Amanu Numerson, Mercy Numerson, Yohanes Berhanu, Abshir Mohamed, Eliab Alemayehu, Amen Deja, Bassam Abdirahman. Bottom (left to right): Abraham Ademe, Siem Kibrom, Elijah Collins-Harden, Chancellor McKinney, Nabay Kiflemeriam



KINGS OF LITERACY
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BROADER IMPACT

The ELC's impact reaches far beyond just the students. Nicole Sorensen, a second-grade teacher at Emerson Elementary and a College of Education alumna, has played a crucial role in this initiative. Her commitment to using research-based practices and creating engaging educational experiences has been vital to the ELC's success in her classroom. "I was really interested in the program because it was [putting] families at the forefront of it," Sorensen explains. She actively participates in meetings, gives feedback, and collaborates with families to develop literacy tools rooted in cultural wisdom.

Sorensen observes that the program has significantly strengthened the bonds between educators, students, and families. "It was great to see from families that there's community buy-in. It provided an [opportunity] to show them that I really care about [the students'] education and the community," she says. This strengthened sense of community has led to increased engagement and support, with families particularly appreciating the ELC's approach. One parent noted, "Every school should have a space like this where families can work together and share," emphasizing the program's success in fostering a collaborative environment and highlighting the positive impact of community involvement in education.

However, these achievements come amidst significant debates about [school closures](#), budget cuts, and the [urgent need for equitable education](#) in Seattle Public Schools. Some Black families have left the district for [homeschooling](#), frustrated by the [negative effects of traditional schooling](#) on their children. [Gentrification](#) has further marginalized some Black families, increasing [community challenges](#). The pandemic has intensified existing racial inequities, making responsive educational practices even more critical.

In this context, the ELC demonstrates that public schools can listen to and learn from Black families and their children, creating joyful and supportive learning spaces. Sorensen emphasizes how the program involves families and values their cultural backgrounds. "This is a collaborative effort to get families more involved in having a say in what their kids are learning in schools," she explains. By integrating families' cultural knowledge into education, the ELC not only engages students but also strengthens community connections. This family-centered approach fosters genuine relationships, making learning more meaningful for everyone involved. These impactful stories often go unnoticed in public discussions, highlighting the need for greater awareness of successful, community-driven educational practices.

Indeed, the ELC has built strong connections among families, educators, and students. Selam Ethiopia, mother of Siem and Senay, was overjoyed to see their book published in Tigrinya, their native language. "I'm so happy," she shared, reflecting the pride felt by many involved. Maya Collins-Harden, Elijah's mother, also found joy in the collaborative process. "I see all three of my children all day, so seeing them at six o'clock in the evening, I'm not Miss Maya anymore; I'm just Elijah's mom," she explained. "I want to learn what other parents and their kids are doing. Sitting down with Elijah was also fun. Hearing his little brain work and coming up with a story together was a great experience. We all contributed pieces to the book, which was a wonderful way to see their creativity come to life."

Through these efforts, the ELC meets pressing community needs while also cultivating a sense of belonging and shared purpose among families, educators, and students.



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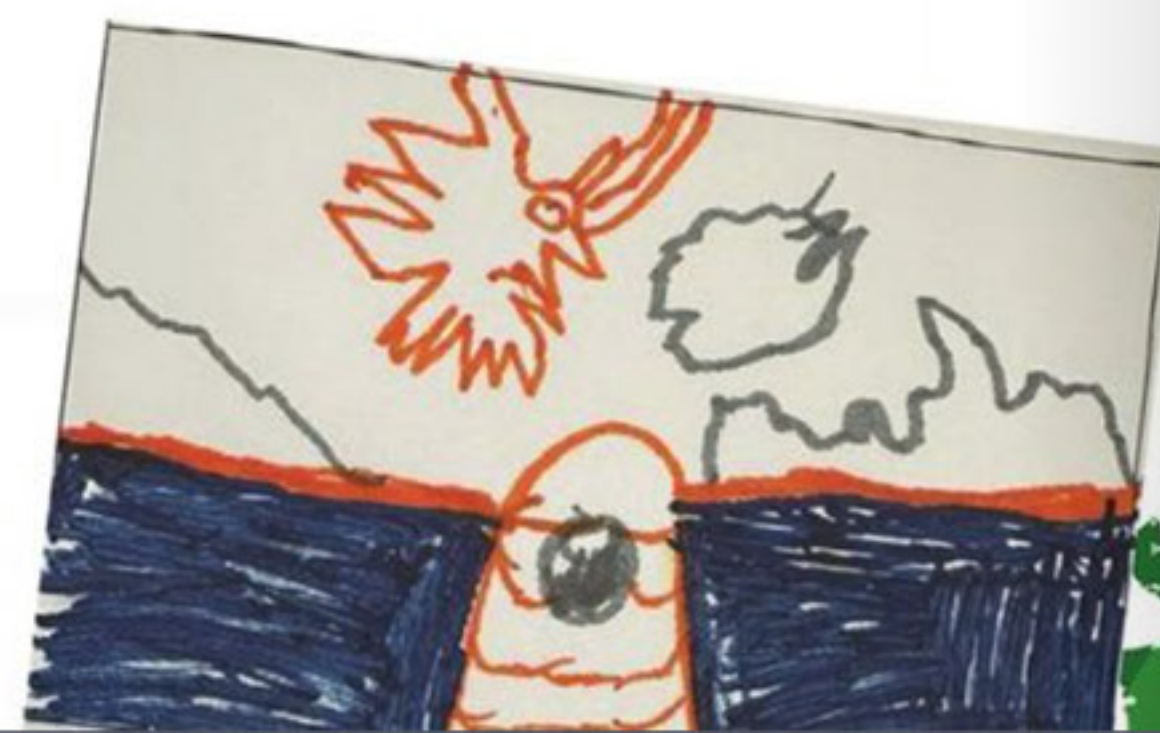
Amen desa

Eliab Alemay

Dr. Beatrice Butler reading to the Kings with Dr. Dana Nickson also seated at the table.



Nabay kif iemariam



BLACK BOY JOY: BEYOND TRADITIONAL METRICS

Since its launch, the ELC has made **impressive strides in boosting student engagement and satisfaction**. At Olympic Hills, 92% of multilingual students love reading, while 89% of African American boys at Emerson Elementary share that enthusiasm. Wing Luke Elementary also shines, with 83% of students and 89% of multilingual learners reporting positive experiences with culturally responsive teaching — well above the district average of 77%.

Despite these successes, Williams highlights the importance of nurturing Black boy excellence beyond conventional metrics. “I look at those traditional measures as lagging indicators,” she explains. “What’s really significant is the way Black boy joy is impacting their learning.” The ELC’s emphasis on culturally relevant and joyful experiences has sparked genuine excitement among students. “Students are now excited about concepts like planning alternative endings, rather than being anxious about standardized testing,” Williams observes.

Nickson echoes this sentiment, describing how “students were deeply engaged in ideation, planning, writing, and sharing of The Picksee story. Students came together connecting as friends across schools. We witnessed joy, camaraderie, and connection to their parents, siblings, and cultural practices in this space. While this work cannot be replicated, educators can learn from this process to engage and honor families’ multiple knowledges and strengths in their context.”

Ishimaru emphasizes the transformative power of joy and creativity: “When we center Black boy joy and engage in intergenerational co-design,” Ishimaru notes, “we create conditions for agency and engagement and joyful learning.” The ELC’s approach — rooted in play, storytelling, and creativity — fosters a vibrant learning environment that challenges conventional methods.

Together, Williams, Ishimaru, Nickson and their teams showcase how the ELC’s innovative strategies celebrate and cultivate the unique cultural strengths of Black boys. By focusing on joy, creativity, and cultural relevance, the ELC not only bridges educational inequities but also creates a more inclusive and dynamic experience that truly supports Black boy excellence.

CONTINUING THE JOURNEY

The Early Literacy Collaborative (ELC) is making a positive difference. Sorensen shares her hopes for the program: “I really just don’t want it to die.” By focusing on culturally responsive teaching and getting families involved, the ELC shows how these approaches can really improve learning. This partnership helps students feel like they belong and empowers them, setting a great example for future education. The ELC highlights the importance of inclusive, culturally relevant experiences that help all students succeed.

As the ELC begins this new chapter, it shows the strength of working together as a community. It has worked to address educational inequities by listening to those most affected. Siem and Senay say, “I want people to know that it’s more fun to write stories if you’re with friends. That’s how we made the book.”

Elijah adds, “Get together with your friend if you like doing something like this, always work as a team, and don’t do stuff by yourself. Almost everything is possible.”

These thoughts capture the ELC’s spirit: turning challenges into opportunities through teamwork and community support.

— VANESSA STONE

Handwritten notes and signatures:
ABSHIT AMANU
Kariab
Senay.K
Chancellor
JOYAH
elijah

STRENGTH IN COLLABORATION

In addition to those quoted in the story, the success of the Early Literacy Collaborative is supported by a strong network of school and district leaders, community partners, and academic collaborators. Led by a diverse group, including many Black women, the initiative emphasizes equity and community engagement, highlighting the impact of collective action in transforming how Black boys, families, and educators work together in education.

SCHOOL AND DISTRICT LEADERS

Keisha Scarlett, a fellow Leadership for Learning graduate, served as the Chief Academic Officer for Seattle Public Schools, setting this project in motion before her departure to become the Superintendent of Schools for Saint Louis Public Schools.

Nichelle Page, the Transition Success Coordinator for Seattle Public Schools, has been pivotal at every step.

Cashel Toner, Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction Support of Seattle Public Schools, ensured that the initiative aligned with the district’s broader literacy goals.

The school principals — **Keyunda Wilson**, **Erin Rasmussen**, **JaLynn Montes**, and **Egypt Charles** — who collaborated with families and educators to find ways to sustain this work in their school communities.

The contributions from the **Family and Community Partnerships team**, the **Department of Racial Equity Advancement (Dr. Beatrice Butler)**, and **Research and Evaluation (Dr. Shelby Cooley and Zach LeClair)** were integral to the initiative’s design and implementation.

ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. Lakeya Afolalu, assistant professor of Language, Literacy and Culture, has also contributed critical literacy expertise, enhancing the collaborative efforts.

Doctoral research and project assistants including **Dawit Alemayehu**, **Ji Ho Yang**, **Kiana Smith**, **Melia LaCour**, **Simone Ngongi-Lukula**, and **Yikealo Beyene** have provided support and research over the years, reflecting the collective commitment from the UW community.

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Katie Brantley, Freedom Schools program director, and **Anab Nur**, Curriculum and Instruction Specialist, WA-BLOC, both of whom were vital in shaping community engagement.

National Black Child Development Institute, who advocate for the needs and voices of Black families in education.

Additionally, this fall **Seattle Public Libraries** joined the collaborative effort, expanding access to literacy resources.

This project is generously supported by the **W.T. Grant Foundation** and the **Killinger Endowed Chair**.